



### "Is a Puzzlement"

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That awkward and ungrammatical phrase “is a puzzlement” has remained engraved in my mind since the first time I saw the musical *The King and I* in New York many years ago. (Frankly, it sounded very much like the kind of thing my father might have said, all the more so since both he and Yul Brynner, the actor playing the King of Siam, were native speakers of Russian.) Alone on the stage, the King muses aloud that “is a puzzlement” why the arrival of his children’s English governess has led to the upheavals and moral breakdown now plaguing his court. Annoyed and angry, he persistently mangles the governess’s native language. Yet she keeps on patiently and politely correcting him, for she realizes that King Chulalongkorn’s mistakes in English are the result of his country’s centuries of isolation from Western civilization.

But today what is an educated American or Englishman to do when a foreigner with a fairly mediocre command of English takes it upon himself to “correct” a native speaker’s use of English? Grin and bear it? Argue? These are questions that have haunted me since childhood. My parents, who were part of the first wave of Russian émigrés who left during the years preceding and following the 1917 revolution, first lived in Sweden, Denmark and Germany, then settled down in France, and in 1941 were forced to move once again, this time to America. When I arrived on the scene shortly afterwards, my parents, like most of their friends and contemporaries, took it for granted that any child would do what they had had to do, i.e., become fluent in four languages by the

age of five. As a result, I was raised speaking Russian, French and German. The surrounding environment, however, ensured that English was my native language.

In addition to their native Russian, my parents had an excellent command of French and German. By the time I was 12, though, I was the resident expert on any questions involving the proper use of English. I rather enjoyed the role of English arbiter in return for all the times I had to turn to them regarding the mysteries of Russian and French. That understanding concerning the unquestioned division of linguistic expertise was a given in our family. And the tradition kept on going. In the 1970s my father wrote his memoirs of his years as Director of Exhibitions at New York’s Wildenstein Gallery, and since his written English was not on the level of his spoken English, he was counting on my editing the book. Following his death shortly after completing the manuscript, I reworked the text, which was subsequently published in the US and in Russia.

My knowledge of Russian, however, was uneven. The fact that I never attended school in Russia made itself felt whenever it came to putting pen to paper, or Cyrillic text to a PC. Though I am relatively confident of my ability as a nearly bilingual cow to moo in Russian till my fellow bovines come home, to this day I am careful to submit all my writings in Russian intended for publication to the watchful eye of a native speaker who is either an academic colleague or a professional editor.

On the other hand, some 40 years devoted to studying and working with Russian language and culture, and ongoing contacts with Russian colleagues and friends in both the US and the country of my roots have helped to bridge the gap between my written and spoken Russian. A decade of teaching the language and literature in American universities, 24 years at the United Nations interpreting from Russian and French into English (and occasionally from English into Russian), years of travel to Russia to lecture and teach translation and interpretation in Russian, and speaking Russian day in and day out with my husband, a Moscow intellectual who left the USSR some 30 years ago, have served to make me, for practical purposes, bilingual. I maintain ongoing e-mail correspondence in Russian with numerous colleagues and friends, and though I occasionally notice a grammatical slipup in the letters of even highly literate and educated native speakers of Russian, it would never occur to me to flag such an error to the writer, or to “correct” someone to prove to him that he is “wrong.” On the other hand, all my friends know that I am always grateful for correction of an infelicity in my Russian.

Like my US colleagues who are engaged in interpreting and translating from Russian, I am acutely aware that the history of Russia has created a distinctive attitude among Russians both to their own language and to foreign tongues. Only those individuals who are either stone deaf or totally devoid of the slightest linguistic and cultural sensitivity can fail to notice the fierce and passionate love and devotion of Russians for their *родной, богатый, великий русский язык*. This is a language which has survived the hailstorm of foreign (including German and Dutch) terms that first battered their way into Russian during the reign of Peter the Great, to be followed by the relentless march of French terms that accompanied the Napoleonic troops and the diction of Pushkin and his nineteenth-century contemporaries, and ultimately by the verbal Klondike of perestroika, which unlocked the linguistic gates to a flood of English management, banking, business, computer, slang and other terms which set up permanent

outposts in all areas of the Russian language. The Russian mass media has – and with good reason – been bursting with angry reactions of readers, writers and viewers fulminating against the linguistic devastation wrought by this invasion of Anglophone terminology, ranging from *киллеры* to *хеджирование* to *ток-шоу*. No need for a host of examples; we are all familiar with them. The modern protective Slavophile reaction to this Westernizing rampage by the English language is thoroughly understandable.

There is, however, a major distinction in the attitude towards these two languages in the US and in Russia. In the United States, Russian has been taught for years in schools and universities, first by pre-war immigrants, later by the waves of émigrés who arrived following World War II and in the 1970s, as well as by several generations of US Slavists who devoted themselves to the study of the language. For decades, therefore, Americans had the opportunity to study Russian with native speakers, while most Russians were learning English from other Russians. The Russian émigrés in the United States were keeping up with their native language, and with changes in that language, while the English of the Soviet Union was frozen in a time warp.

To use a favorite Sovietism, it is well known to everyone that the USSR was a closed society, and that native speakers of Western languages who could serve as teachers and language editors were few and far between. Russian English-language textbooks and linguistic materials tended to be ideologically biased; Russian-born teachers of English unconcernedly transmitted old-fashioned and nearly archaic British expressions to students who passed them on to their students. For many Russian students, moreover, the British “dialect” was and still is the only acceptable version of the English language. The few native English-language editors, primarily aging American, Canadian and British Communists working in English-language newspapers such as the *Moscow News* or Progress Publishers, were at the mercy of Soviet editors who placed ideology over language and insisted on the “goal-directed steps” and “radiant future” characteristic of Marxist jargon.

Yet – and this is important in seeking an answer to the “puzzlement” – during those same decades in which dusty, arcane English was being handed down in Russian schools and colleges, the country saw a flowering of superbly qualified English-Russian translators, who both did outstanding theoretical work and provided brilliant renderings into Russian of world classics. The poetry of Burns as translated by Marshak, Shakespeare through the lens of Pasternak, or Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* as transformed by Rita Rait-Kovaleva, are classics of the art; many English-language translations of the Russian classics pale in comparison. The architecture and art of translation as practiced in Soviet Russia raised the bar to a level that was admired by translators worldwide. There was a very good reason for this; in an era where a joke told to the wrong person could lead to a twenty-year prison sentence or worse, translation was an ideologically safe haven. As compared to many other activities, translating classical Greek or Roman, or even nineteenth-century English poetry, was relatively innocuous.

While translators were penning their way to creative heights, interpreters were struggling. In addition to the shortage of native speakers capable of teaching and writing good English there was a near-total dearth of native speakers of English capable of interpreting, let alone of doing simultaneous interpretation. As a result, Russian-born interpreters were obliged to interpret both from English into Russian and Russian into English. Practice worked its way backward into theory. While in the West – and in particular in international organizations such as the UN – interpretation for the most part was done from the foreign into the native language, Russian theoreticians touted the benefits of interpretation from the native into the foreign language. The *de facto* shortage led to theoretical underpinnings for the assumption that “native into foreign is better,” though anyone who has ever had to listen to a non-native speaker of English struggle to interpret from his or her native language into a foreign language is most unlikely to agree. As a result of being forced to work from Russian into English, many Russian interpreters accepted

the notion that this was a “good thing,” and in fact a very good thing. The next logical and pragmatic – though rather dubious – step was to posit that Russian interpreters (i.e., native speakers of Russian) could do a better job than native speakers of English in interpreting from Russian into English.

There have, of course, been exceptions to the “into native is better rule,” in the form of some brilliant and virtually bilingual Russian (and a few US) interpreters who could work into both languages. Oleg Troyanovsky, Viktor Sukhodrev, Boris Belitsky, Yurii Klebnikov and Bill Krimer were a few of these stars of the interpretation world.

The closed nature of Soviet society and the desperate need for individuals with an excellent knowledge of English spurred Russian teachers, editors, translators and interpreters to perfect their English-language skills and doggedly cling to their chosen profession. No wonder they valued it so highly. This was their passport to excellent jobs, trips abroad, the chance to purchase foreign goods, read literature in English and legitimately engage in contacts with foreigners. Even when the society opened up, this attitude remained. Many of those who had clambered up to the peak of the English-language establishment firmly dug in their heels and refused to descend from those heights – or to allow native English speakers to join them there. These “foreigners” were trespassers, and that Russian monopoly on English was not going to cede its position lightly.

Perestroika unquestionably gave a major and irreversible jolt to the Russian English-language teaching and translation-interpretation elite. Foreign language-teaching books began to be published in Russia. Native English speakers were hired as teachers and editors (along with a very few translators and interpreters, who could hardly service the entire country’s needs), and Russian specialists in English found it vastly easier to go abroad for training and maintenance of their language skills.

Nevertheless, the effect of decades of isolation has left a strong stamp on Russian speakers of English. Years of studying English with teachers who had no contact with native speakers of English, and of learning from the

ideologically sanitized world of outdated textbooks did not provide students with a knowledge of contemporary English usage. Language is far from static; it is constantly developing and changing. Usage changes as we speak. A little learning, said the 18th-century English writer Alexander Pope, is a dangerous thing, and even “some” knowledge can be equally shaky. An individual completely ignorant of foreign languages is aware of the gaps in his knowledge, and may well look up to those who have mastered one or several tongues. But a *полузнайка*, someone with “little” or “some” knowledge, may have a highly exaggerated view of his mastery of a language.

*Везнайка* presents particular dangers for an interpreter working from a native into a foreign language. Regardless of what “knowing a language” means, and what “knowing Russian” or “knowing English” actually involves, one thing is crystal clear: under the pressure of the booth, the grammar, syntax and style of a simultaneous interpreter working into a non-native language rapidly disintegrate. A Russian who has excellent mastery of the English tense system may still have trouble with articles, syntax and style, and particularly with register. How can he also have an all-encompassing knowledge of the endless rules for proper punctuation, capitalization, letter and resume-writing? Of exclamations and interjections and acceptable and non-acceptable curse words? Only long-term exposure to the linguistic milieu can lead to true comfort with such issues, and with register. To phrase the argument in Chomskyan terms, a non-native speaker of the language, no matter how sophisticated his theoretical knowledge of grammar, will not be able to generate the same kinds of sentences as a native speaker. And a Whorfian would assert that a native speaker of Russian cannot have the cultural worldview determined by the English language. Nor will he be familiar with all the associations that English words and phrases bring to mind for a Briton or an American.

A Russian *полузнайка* can very easily turn into a *везнайка*, categorically asserting “Я прав – Вы не правы,” as opposed to the American tendency to say, “Well, you have your

opinion and I have mine.” That attitude seems to apply to notions concerning mastery of a language as well as to a host of other subjects. To go still further into the realm of national stereotypes and fixed ideas, the old-style *презрение* for foreigners – the reverse side of the coin of the old Soviet superiority-inferiority complex/love-hate relationship with the West, which posited that anything Western was highly desirable, while at the same time *у нас всё лучшее* sometimes seems to have spilled over into a *презрение* for the foreigners’ knowledge of their native language.

Perhaps the most mind-boggling example of linguistic arrogance I have heard about was that of the Moscow film editor who busied himself “correcting” the English subtitles an American friend of mine had done for a Russian movie. When she objected to one of his “changes” (which was, in fact, a blatant mistranslation) and reminded him that she was a native speaker of English, he retorted that, “Я такой же носитель языка, как и Вы.”

Here we return to the “puzzlement.” Throughout years of contacts with Russian native speakers who work as teachers, editors, translators and interpreters of English, dozens of my US colleagues and I have repeatedly encountered a thinly veiled attitude of “I know English better than you do,” or, to tweak the words of Pete Seeger’s song, “This language is my language – it isn’t your language.” I repeat: neither I nor the overwhelming majority of my US colleagues who have not been educated in Russia – regardless of our fluency in the language – would ever venture to publish a piece in Russian that had not been carefully vetted by a native speaker of the language, a professional editor or an academic. Yet time and again I have seen native speakers of Russian blithely publish articles, abstracts, and even entire books without feeling the slightest need to submit them for review to a native speaker of English. In all fairness, this behavior seems far more characteristic of people living in Russia than of those living in the US, since ongoing immersion in an English-speaking milieu usually fairly quickly convinces émigrés that the locals have a solid grounding in their native English and do in fact know what they are talking about.

A few months ago native English speakers working at the English-language *The Moscow Times* were told that some of the awkward phrasing in the English texts of Russian authors reflected “distinctive features” of their “specific style” and was not to be corrected. That’s for a start. I wish these had been isolated incidents, but far from it. A recent issue of an academic journal published by a major Russian educational institution had a page of English titles of articles spiked with grammatical and spelling errors. When I pointed this out to the editor, he was incredulous. “That can’t be,” he remonstrated. “These were translated by one of our English teachers.” Point made. I had questioned the Pope’s command of Latin.

I am not about to trot out the old hackneyed argument that the native speaker is always correct. Native speakers, as we all know, can make mistakes both in speaking and in writing their native languages. There are linguistic slips, changes in usage, incorrect usages. Two eagle-eyed Russian editors and proofreaders have found various typos and slipups in various English texts of my books and articles, and I am most grateful to them for that. As a member of the editorial board of a Moscow journal, I have on occasion called the editors’ attention to various spelling and grammatical errors in the Russian texts of articles submitted for publication, and have caught a Russian editor using the wrong declensional form for a numeral. But I also have had to stand firm to keep 20th-century standard English phrases from being “corrected” by zealous Russian editors into Dickensian English parlance. How would a Russian speaker feel if his modern Russian prose were “corrected” by an English speaker to sound like Sumarokov? In the overwhelming majority of cases, though, the native speaker serves as both the standard and the judge of correct usage.

I recently translated a book by a distinguished Russian historian. Due to his highly limited knowledge of English, our entire correspondence and all our telephone conversations were conducted exclusively in Russian. The learned gentleman, (who in fact had been living in the US for quite a few years and is one of the rather few examples of such a

Russian who has remained relatively immune to the surrounding linguistic milieu) did not hesitate to “correct” my translation of “the late Mrs. Smirnova” to “the passed over Mrs. Smirnova,” and “the advice of Dr. Ivanov” to “the advices of Ivanovs.” Only the solemn promise – practically an oath – extracted from the author by our editor to the effect that there would be no more such “corrections” allowed me to finish work on the manuscript.

While working with another Russian author on the English text of his article, which was filled with incorrect English usage, I was constantly informed that all these forms “were in the dictionary” (which dictionary?) and were therefore by definition correct. Never mind that dictionary forms a) may be outdated and b) must be used correctly and in the appropriate linguistic-cultural context. That was fairly irrelevant, though, since, of course, he knew English better than I did. That was a given.

Things are not much better for interpreters. Some of the Russian delegates at international meetings are devoted aficionados of the sport of “catch the interpreter.” This game is played by monitoring every syllable uttered by the English-language interpreter and making as many “corrections” as possible. Of course, any interpreter – with whatever language combination – can make a mistake. There is no such animal as an infallible interpreter, and a delegate has every right to correct a real mistake. But this requires that the Russian delegate possess an excellent knowledge of the language into which the interpreter is working. An American interpreter was once interpreting a delegate who kept using the word *опасение*. Tired of repeating “fears” and “apprehensions,” the interpreter referred to “misgivings.” After a moment of deathly stillness – during which the interpreter (as so often happens) waited with thumping heart for the axe to fall – the delegate proudly announced, “Is mistake in the interpretation. We are not giving anything away.” What delegate wants, delegate gets.

Russian delegates who insist on English cognates as translations for words such as *адекватный* or *корректный* are in fact obliging the native speaker of English to come out with incorrect renderings. Moreover, an

English translation of a Russian text given to an English-language interpreter and marked "Read as written" can put the interpreter in the awkward position of saying some very odd things. How does a listener react on hearing a native speaker of English speaking thoroughly non-native English? How would a Russian-language interpreter react on being handed a Russian text with mangled verb aspects, jumbled case endings and preposition salad?

"*В чужой монастырь со своим уставом не ходят,*" or "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" are proverbs common to many cultures. And "when in America, do as the English speakers do," – without imposing a *чужой устав*. Never mind the basic tenets of common courtesy in cross-cultural communication; denying the obvious fact that a simultaneous interpreter's knowledge of his native language is superior to that of a non-native speaker is both fraught with serious implications for linguistic communication and can lead to serious misunderstandings in international relations. I have no quarrel with a Russian interpreter who wishes to correct a native English-speaking colleague who has genuinely misunderstood the Russian original. And I am fully aware that today's commercial market often requires native Russian interpreters to work "both ways" at a meeting, i.e., from English into Russian and from Russian into English, and to do the best possible job in this situation. But I cannot accept the illogical conclusion of some of these "monitors" – and one with far-reaching consequences – that native Anglophone interpreters are simply unnecessary and can easily be replaced by native speakers of Russian.

So I would plead for some restraint on both sides. Many Russian professionals, editors, translators and interpreters have attained an extraordinary mastery of English, and post-perestroika Russian students of English have made phenomenal progress. In fact, many Russian students of English have long had a theoretical grasp of English grammatical structures that is considerably better than that of quite a few native speakers of English, and many American students of Russian have a better grasp than native Russian speakers of the subtleties of

the rules of Russian grammar. That is natural, since the native speaker does not need to give constant thought to grammatical rules.

But no American student of Russian would then take it upon himself to go about correcting the Russian – oral or written – of a native speaker. He would be considered by his American colleagues as just short of clinically insane. Nor would a native speaker of French, Spanish or German take it upon himself to correct the English of a native speaker of English. English-speaking Western Europeans have been in contact with native speakers of English for far longer than most Russians, and tend to have a much more accurate idea of what is actually involved in mastering the language.

English has emerged as a global language, and its study in today's Russia is widespread. Unfortunately, not all Russian speakers understand that the claim to know English better than a native Anglophone and correction of his English (to use a completely inappropriate metaphor) makes the English speaker see red. One's language is a part of one's cultural identity, and these bounds and borders must be respected.

There are some thoughtful voices with whom it is possible to dialogue on this issue of "Russian English," but unfortunately these still seem to be in a definite minority. That is why I have decided to take this issue out into the open and stop skulking around wrapped in the shawl of linguistic politesse. Sorry, *дорогие коллеги и друзья*. While I'm always glad to help Russians who are studying and working with English, this language is my language; it isn't your language. I would hope that one day we will be at the point when both Russian and English will be "our" languages, when the English language will no longer be the fiefdom of the Russian English-language elite, with native speakers relegated to the linguistic bleachers. And that then native Russian English teachers, editors, translators and interpreters will cooperate with their American English-speaking counterparts to produce the best possible English-language product. But work on that has to start now. As the new American President has been saying, "Time for a change."